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Art 103: Advanced Oil Painting
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Rethinking Fragonard: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Contemporary Rococo

At the beginning of Winter quarter, I started an oil portrait of American stripper and rapper Brooke Candy. I was interested in exploring the relationship between “high” art and “low” art, by basing a richly detailed portrait of an obscure celebrity on a low-resolution youtube still. At the same time, I took a course on eighteenth-century intellectual history that introduced me to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “Discourse on the Arts and Sciences.” As a self-proclaimed artist and historian, I was interested in the question posed by the Academy of Dijon in 1750, which asked whether morality was improved by the arts, or corrupted by them. Rousseau argued that art was an unnecessary preoccupation foreshadowing the fall of overextended nations, signifying moral decay. The Rococo, a style of painting prevalent during Rousseau’s career as social critic, factored heavily into my personal appraisal of “The First Discourse.” I looked to Jean-Honoré Fragonard, aiming to appropriate his visual opulence in my portrait of Brooke Candy. Fragonard’s pastel paintings playfully embraced the artistic freedom of romanticization, making him Rousseau’s irreconcilable opposite, and inserting him into my internal discussion of art and morality. For Rousseau, art was a twisted distraction meant to divert man’s attention away from his social enslavement, preoccupying him with taste and discrimination. For Fragonard, art served as a imaginatively limitless space for creating beauty and grandeur. I continued my painting for the next two months, formulating my opinion.

I decided much of the visual culture prevalent today closely echos the aesthetic inclinations of the Rococo. Contemporary pop culture is saturated with visually idealized images

similar to Rococo interpretations of reality—the photographs adorning the glossy pages of magazines do not exist to remind viewers about the truth of their physical existence, but distract them from it. The art of the Rococo served a similar purpose; unconcerned with the banalities of verisimilitude, painters like Fragonard emphasized the beauty of pastoral landscapes and social interaction through visual embellishment. The decorative realism Fragonard employed to describe his environment is matched today by the flawless images that characterize western visual culture. These images are criticized for being false representations of reality, but they retain an unlearned freedom and cater to a wide audience.

In my painting of Brooke Candy, I initially aimed to appropriate the playful eroticism associated with Rococo art. I wanted the visual metaphor to connect elements of contemporary popular media to eighteenth-century French bourgeoisie culture. Candy, the central figure in the image, wears a sexually suggestive suit of armor that gleams in the pale blue Los Angeles sunlight as she casually strolls down Beverly Hills Boulevard. Her expression is blank, and she is centered squarely in the foreground. The slope of the road that frames her figure is adorned with palms meant to signify the distinctive geography of southern California. However, as in Fragonard's work, the landscape is consciously embellished. The SUV's that usually line Beverly Hills Boulevard are replaced with manicured hedges, and the pavement glows with a soft pink hue. More directly, the flowering tree on the left visually quotes Fragonard's 1775 lush landscape painting, *Fete at Saint-Cloud*.

Fragonard did not choose his subjects based on their historical relevance, but on graphic appeal. Similarly, I chose Brooke Candy as my subject for her relative obscurity and sexual nature. Like Candy, an openly bisexual stripper, Fragonard's subjects are blithely tantalizing, and their physicality is echoed further by the sensuous curves of fertile landscapes. In my painting,

Candy—a celebrity who centers her public persona around eroticism—is encircled by shapely bushes that imitate the curves of her body. While there is an obvious temporal disconnect between Brooke Candy and Jean-Honoré Fragonard, the sumptuous qualities valued by both accentuate the a compelling historical parallel generated by visual comparison.

Because he was criticized for creating decoratively grandiose paintings that lacked academic sobriety, Fragonard's work provides a relevant reference point for trends in visual media existing outside "highbrow" parameters. Despite the assertions of many eighteenth-century critics, painters associated with the Rococo were skillfully perceptive, and rendered forms with an informed technical realism. Embellishments sweetened their images for unacademic viewers, prompting accusations of depthless frivolity. Likewise, visual elements of mass consumptions are considered unchallenging and are estranged from scholarly study.

Eighteenth-century philisophs condemned decorative painting as morally destructive. They criticized visual idealization as propaganda serving to lull impressionable viewers into a misconstruct of reality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "First Discourse" describes the arts as an impediment to man's freedom, ornamenting his chains with "garlands of flowers." Man, enslaved by society, is distracted from his condition by urbane tastes and luxuries. Social moralists like Rousseau probably felt something akin to what contemporary critics feel when they see our own society glamorized in magazines and television. Pop culture is soaked with air-brushed skin, doctored waistlines, and designer wardrobes; images of ideal people living ideal lives bombard commercial culture. However, the dichotomy between intellectual relevance and tabloid accessibility underscores deeper patterns of social division. The disparity between carefree French aristocrats and the unsmiling ideology of eighteenth-century social critics eventually erupted into bloody Revolution.

If contemporary visual culture has historical parallel, the Rococo is a feasibly contender. The movement serves as a useful tool for comparing social divisions reflected by “high and low culture,” evident in both popular eighteenth-century European aristocratic tastes, and twenty-first century consumption patterns. My portrait of Brooke Candy is owed to Fragonard’s airy idealism, but considers the criticisms summarized in “The First Discourse.” Perhaps art does contribute to the corruption of society as Rousseau outlined. However, he explains the nature of social interaction itself is degenerative, and the arts and sciences as embellishments ornamenting the phenomena. They are not the cause of degradation, simply a consequence. If this is the case, and the arts are not necessarily to *blame* for the corruption of man, then why not embrace them as a space to explore ideal beauty? Brooke Candy represents a sexual aesthetic freedom, unencumbered by the limits of “high art.” Fragonard’s images of frolicsome gratification exercise a similar liberty, shedding the banalities of reality. Society basks in the garlands concealing the chains of social oppression, because they hide the mundane truth about our physical existence.